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A Mystery That Ends In Poetry

After 40 Years, A Tape of Pablo Neruda Is Finally Played Again

By Darragh Johnson Washington Post Staff Writer Wednesday, June 7, 2006; Page C01

The Pablo Neruda tape went missing sometime in the past 40 years, and no one even knew until 1999. That's when Felix Angel became "obsessed with lack of memory" -- and with finding a tape he wasn't even sure existed.

The great Chilean poet had given a reading in Washington in 1966, and Angel, curator of the Cultural Center at the Inter-American Development Bank, figured it must have been taped. He tracked down the historian and old friend of Neruda's who had introduced the poet.

But Leopoldo Castedo had just died of a heart attack.

Angel asked around at the IDB, where Neruda had been scheduled to give the reading, but no one could help. He quizzed IDB retirees and former employees. None of them knew a thing about the tape.

His search became, he says, "almost like 'The Da Vinci Code.' "

Last night, at the IDB auditorium, Neruda's voice rang loud and clear. Back at the bank where he was supposed to have

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Pablo Neruda in 1971 after winning the Nobel Prize. He died in 1973. (United Press International Photos)

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spoken 40 years ago, lines for the free reading stretched out the door and down New York Avenue NW, and hundreds people filled the three-level auditorium until it was standing room only.

Angel did find a six-inch reelto-reel tape on which Neruda's deeply cadenced voice rings like church bells. On the hour-long tape, he reads 15 poems in Spanish.

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He speaks of love -- "tonight I can write the saddest lines. / I loved her, and sometimes she loves me too." And loathing -- "Why, why do we hate so much / those who hate us?"

He speaks of his "mamadre" -- "Dear more-mother, / I was never able to say stepmother! . . . Life made you into bread, / and there we fed on you." And his "Blunt Father" -- "Captain of his train, of the cold dawn, / And scarcely had the sun / begun to show itself / Than there he was with his beard . . . And his duty to geography."

He speaks of death, then does his "Ode to Socks," this pair of "wild socks" that "were so beautiful that for the first time / My feet seemed to me unacceptable, / Like two decrepit firemen, unworthy of that / Embroidered fire, / Of those shining socks."

It was June 1966, five years before he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Neruda, a member of the Chilean Communist Party, was to speak at the IDB, but it was the height of the Cold War and anticommunist feeling ran deep among the bank's employees. The IDB president was forced to stand "in the doorway of the bank and, despite the protests and sirens, announced through a bullhorn that the ceremony would take place at the Hotel Mayflower." There, Castedo introduced the poet, and the reading was "a colossal success."

All of that, from bullhorn to success, is how the historian described it 33 years later in a speech at the IDB that referred to the Neruda reading. Angel listened intently and decided that a tape of Neruda's reading *must* have been made.

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